



A Parisian Mystery in Metal: Tracing Saint Maron's Reliquary

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Cover Photo

Three-quarter view of the Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron, ca. 12th century. Cabinet Fligny, Paris, France, December 17, 2015.

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The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Maronite Research Institute (MARI) or the Phoenix Center for Lebanese Studies at the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK).

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Table of Contents

- I. Introduction
- II. **The Artifact in Focus:** The Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron, Cabinet Fligny, Paris, France
 - 1. Description of the Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron (Lot No. 11)
 - 2. Analysis of The Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron
- III. **Correlating the Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron to Historical Accounts**
- IV. **Reflection and Future Research Directions**



A Parisian Mystery in Metal: Tracing Saint Maron's Reliquary

By Guita G. Hourani

I. Introduction

The story of Saint Maron is not only one of profound asceticism and spiritual influence but also one of enduring veneration, whose reach transcends centuries. Long after his death, his relics became powerful symbols of sanctity, drawing reverence from generations across the world. The relics of Saint Maron were cherished as conduits of divine grace, and their preservation and veneration reflect not only deep devotion but also the fascinating journey of sacred artifacts through time and place.

In medieval Christianity, the veneration of relics was a vibrant, almost sacred tradition. During the Crusades, religious fervor mixed with political ambition, prompting European knights and clergy to seek out holy relics to bring back to their monasteries and churches, thereby enhancing their prestige and influence.¹ Reliquaries, often ornately designed to encase these relics, were both spiritual treasures and artistic masterpieces, underscoring the importance of the relics they protected. To medieval Christians, relics were not mere objects; they were seen as living embodiments of divine power. Each fragment of a saint's body was thought to retain the saint's spiritual energy, acting as an intercessor between the faithful and the divine.² A relic connected the believer directly to the saint, who, in turn, offered protection, favor, and even miracles.³ This belief in the sanctity of relics transformed them into objects of immense cultural, religious, and political value.

Saint Maron's relics, once dispersed across various Christian traditions, stand as a lasting testament to his enduring reverence. His cranium was initially enshrined at a monastery along the Orontes River, before being moved to a monastery bearing his name in Kfar-Hay, Lebanon. From there, it traveled to the Abbey of Sassovivo in

¹ Smith, J. (2024, August 31). *Religious motivators: Faith, relics, and the Crusader States*. Medieval History. <https://historymedieval.com/religious-motivators-faith-relics-and-the-crusader-states/>

² Walsham, A. (2010). Introduction: Relics and remains. *Past & Present*, 206(suppl_5), 9–36. https://academic.oup.com/past/article/206/suppl_5/9/1453339?login=false

³ Boehm, B. D. (2011). *Relics and reliquaries in medieval Christianity*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/relic/hd_relic.htm



Umbria in Italy, then to its own church in Volperino, and later to San Feliciano Cathedral in Foligno.⁴ At the dawn of the third millennium, a fragment of the relic returned to its original place of enshrinement in Lebanon.⁵



Figure 1: A view of the Abbey of the Holy Cross of Sassovivo. (Source: Strada dell'Olio DOP Umbria)

The movement of relics across borders was often driven by both spiritual and political agendas. Religious institutions sought to amplify their prestige and influence by acquiring sacred relics, and these relics were often transported along trade routes, sometimes with the involvement of merchants, who elevated their

⁴ Hourani, G. G. (1997). Saint Maron's relic. *Journal of Maronite Studies*. Maronite Research Institute (MARI).

http://www.maronite-institute.org/MARI/JMS/january97/Saint_Marons_Rellic.htm

⁵ Zoghbi, M.-R. (2000, February 9). *La relique de Saint-Maroun ramenée à Kfarhay* [The Relic of Saint Maron Returned to Kfar-Hay]. *La Revue du Liban*. <http://www.rdl.com.lb/2000/3723/maroun.html>



value beyond just the spiritual realm.⁶ The intricate and often lavish design of reliquaries—crafted from gold, silver, ivory, and precious stones—reflected the immense worth attributed to their holy contents.⁷

In 2016, during her ongoing exploration of Saint Maron's veneration and related artifacts,⁸ the author discovered a remarkable reliquary chef/head listed for sale in Paris. This find sparked a deeper investigation into the object's origins and its connection to the long history of Saint Maron's relics.

While the author cannot scientifically authenticate the claims made by the selling house regarding the provenance of the reliquary, she will assess them through historical analysis, comparing the descriptions provided by the sellers with similar reliquaries, historical records, and scholarly research.

This investigation aims to triangulate the available information and contextualize the artifact within the broader tradition of relic veneration. In addition to this, the study will correlate the ca. 1490 reliquary bust in the Cathedral of San Feliciano in Foligno, which houses the actual cranium of Saint Maron, to the claim of the seller, tracing the sacred journey of his relics from the 5th to the 21st centuries. The author cautions the reader to approach this study as an exploration of the historical and cultural context surrounding the reliquary, rather than a definitive verification of its authenticity.

⁶ Wiedenheft, E. (2017, October 12). Bodies as commodities: The medieval trade in Christian saints' relics. *Economic History Society*. <https://ehs.org.uk/bodies-as-commodities-the-medieval-trade-in-christian-saints-relics/>

⁷ Boehm (2011).

⁸ The author has conducted research and field visits in Sassovivo, Volperino, and Foligno in Italy; Valamo in Finland; Moscow in Russia; Aleppo in Syria; and various locations in Lebanon. She has published several articles on the veneration of Saint Maron and his artistic and material representations, including paintings, murals, and reliquaries. Additionally, she holds the largest known collection of images depicting Saint Maron across different traditions and countries. The references to these articles are as follows:

- Hourani, G. G. (2024, February). *Hymn for the veneration of Saint Maron in the Romanian Orthodox tradition*. The Maronite Research Institute (MARI), Lebanon
https://www.academia.edu/114686919/HYMN_FOR_THE_VENERATION_OF_SAINT_MARON_IN_THE_ROMANIAN_ORTHODOX_TRADITION.
- Valevicius, A., & Hourani, G. G. (2015, February). *Saint Maron the Anchorite and his tradition in Russia*.
https://www.academia.edu/94986085/SAINT_MARON_THE_ANCHORITE_AND_HIS_TRADITION_IN_RUSSIA
- Hourani, G. G. (2011). *Russian icons of Saint Maron in Finland*. *The Journal of Maronite Studies*.
https://www.academia.edu/94986666/Russian_Icons_of_Saint_Maron_in_Finland.
- Hourani (1997).



II. The Artifact in Focus: Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron, Cabinet Fligny, Paris, France

The Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron, currently for sale in Paris at Cabinet Fligny, offers a fascinating glimpse into over 1,600 years of religious devotion and historical intrigue. This remarkable artifact, linked to the veneration of Saint Maron and the Abbey of Sassovivo in Umbria, Italy, combines expert craftsmanship with profound religious symbolism. Made from hammered, repoussé, and gilded silver, with agate and carnelian eyes, it reflects the enduring legacy of medieval ecclesiastical art. The reliquary's design features sharply defined facial features and a stylized tonsured⁹ skull, symbolizing the saint's monastic identity and holiness.

Beyond its artistic value, the reliquary head holds significant historical importance, embodying the fusion of Eastern and Western Christian traditions. The Abbey of Sassovivo played a pivotal role in preserving Saint Maron's relics, and the inscription on the reliquary ties it directly to this custodianship. Though the skull is no longer present, questions arise about its past and the journey of the reliquary, possibly during times of turmoil in the 15th century that befell the abbey. This section delves into the relic's craftsmanship, its symbolic meaning, and its fascinating historical narrative, offering an in-depth look at this remarkable object.

1. Description of the Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron (Lot No. 11)

Lot No. 11: Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron

Dated: 12th century

Origin: Italy, Umbria

Dimensions of the Chef: Height: 32.5 cm, Width: 16 cm

Gross weight: 1039.9 g

Specifications: Cracks at the back of the head and front of the neck, modern pins.

Auction Price: €180,000

Auction House: Cabinet Fligny, Expertise Haute Époque

⁹ The tonsure, a practice used to identify monks, typically involves shaving the crown of the head while leaving a ring of hair around the sides. Craig, K. M. (2015). *Bringing out the saints: Journeys of relics in tenth to twelfth century Northern France and Flanders* (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles).

https://escholarship.org/content/qt94d9p7fh/qt94d9p7fh_noSplash_93de09fcfde25293793c849a41eff5b8.pdf



Auction Date: December 17, 2015

Location: Piasa, 118 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, Paris, France

The description of the *Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron*¹⁰ translates from French as follows:

“Reliquary chef of Saint Maron made of hammered, repoussé, engraved, and partially gilded silver, with agate (or carnelian) eyes, and cabochons of glass paste, agate, and carnelian. The head consists of three sections: one for the face, one for the back, and a third for the top of the skull. These sections are joined together by simple pins sliding into rings—two fasteners on each side, one at the back, and the top secured by movable, pierced oval pieces.”

“The face is characterized by severe features, with eyebrows highlighted by small circles, arched brow ridges, almond-shaped protruding eyes, angular cheekbones, a straight nose, a pronounced median groove on the upper lip, a wide mouth with thin, downturned lips, a prominent chin, and stylized C-shaped ears. The skull is tonsured, with a crown of hair depicted as parallel, vertical lines. The base of the neck is adorned with a decorative band bordered by pearls alternating with rosettes and cabochons. The hair, eyebrows, and decorative band are gilded. A stamp at the base and back of the neck, composed of a cross with the letters SA, XO VI, VO at the ends of the cross branches, corresponds to the ownership mark of the Abbey of Sassovivo, near Foligno in Umbria.”¹¹

2. Analysis of The Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron

The reliquary chef, crafted from hammered, repoussé, engraved, and partially gilded silver, is a prime example of medieval ecclesiastical art. The eyes are made from agate or carnelian, while cabochons of glass paste, agate, and carnelian adorn the piece. The chef consists of three sections: face, back, and

¹⁰ Cabinet Fligny, Expertise Haute Époque. (2015, December 17). Lot No. 11: *Reliquary chef of Saint Maron*. Piasa, 118 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, Paris, France. <https://www.fligny-haute-epoque.com/objet/chef-reliquaire-de-saint-maron/>

¹¹ Cabinet Fligny (2015).



top of the skull—joined by simple pins inserted into rings, with fasteners securing the structure.¹²



Figure 2: Frontal view of the Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron, ca. 12th century. Cabinet Fligny, Paris, France, December 17, 2015.

The reliquary head lacks the traditional accompanying core or base commonly seen with such artifacts; instead, it rests on the collar that encircles the base of the neck. The face features sharply defined characteristics, including arched brow ridges, almond-shaped eyes, angular cheekbones, a straight nose, a pronounced median groove on the upper lip, thin downturned lips, a

¹² Cabinet Fligny (2015).



prominent chin, and stylized C-shaped ears. The tonsured skull is depicted with parallel vertical lines, further emphasizing its monastic identity.



Figure 3: Head reliquary of St. Eustace © British Museum

In searching for similar objects for comparison, the Saint Eustace reliquary head (c. 1180–1200, Basle, Switzerland, now at the British Museum) was particularly interesting. Both the Saint Maron and Saint Eustace reliquaries date to the 12th century and exhibit similar craftsmanship. The Saint Eustace head is also made from silver-gilt repoussé metal sheets and is close in height and weight—(H) 35 cm × (W) 16.6 cm, weighing 1.6 kg—to that of Maron's.



Additionally, like Saint Maron's reliquary, it features a lid on the top of the skull covering a hollow compartment for relics.¹³

Beyond structural similarities, both reliquaries share decorative elements that enhance their sacred function. In the case of Saint Eustace, a decorative gem-set filigree band encircles the head, whereas Saint Maron's reliquary features a similar band at the base of the neck. Bordered by alternating pearls, rosettes, and cabochons, this band enhances the reliquary's aesthetic appeal.¹⁴ Additionally, the gilding on the hair, eyebrows, and other elements accentuates key features, reinforcing their symbolic significance and elevating the overall sense of reverence embodied in the reliquary.

Expert analyses classify these reliquaries as part of a distinct genre. Known as 'chef' reliquaries, they were a prevalent form of sacred art in the medieval period. As "speaking" reliquaries, their very form reveals their function—housing and venerating relics.¹⁵

Despite their distinct regional origins—Umbria for Saint Maron and Basel for Saint Eustace—the reliquaries exemplify a shared artistic tradition that flourished in the 12th century. The Saint Eustace reliquary, crafted in Basel between 1180 and 1200,¹⁶ and the Saint Maron reliquary, assessed to be of the same period, both reflect a fusion of Byzantine and Western European artistic influences. The meticulous repoussé metalwork, gilded detailing, and incorporation of precious stones in both reliquaries underscore this fusion, illustrating how medieval workshops integrated diverse visual languages to create objects that resonated with both monastic and lay devotion. Their craftsmanship not only reflects the ecclesiastical artistry of their time but also underscores the significant role played by artists in shaping medieval Christian worship and cultural production.

¹³ Medieval Histories. (2018, November 20). *The St. Eustace head reliquary*. Medieval.eu. <https://www.medieval.eu/the-st-eustace-head-reliquary/>

¹⁴ Cabinet Fligny (2015).

¹⁵ Medieval Histories (2018).

¹⁶ Google Arts & Culture. (n.d.). *Reliquary of St. Eustace* (1180/1200). <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/reliquary-of-st-eustace/OAFJKUfNR4Hwvg?hl=en>



III. Correlating the Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron to Historical Accounts

A stamped mark on the base and back of the neck of the reliquary chef features a cross with the letters SA, XO, VI, and VO (Figure 4), which corresponds to the Abbey of Sassovivo's ownership mark. This inscription confirms the reliquary as part of the abbey's custodianship. Originally, the reliquary was designed to house Saint Maron's skull, as indicated by the open top of the head (Figure 5). However, Cabinet Fligny has confirmed that the skull is no longer present.

This raises the question: Was the reliquary taken while the skull was left behind, possibly deemed of lesser value? Throughout history, looters or individuals in desperate circumstances often prioritized more easily transportable or commercially valuable artifacts.¹⁷ The history of the Abbey, as outlined by the Diocese of Foligno¹⁸ and Ludovico Jacobilli in *Vite de' Santi e Beati dell'Umbria e di quelli i corpi de' quali riposano in essa provincia* (Lives of the Saints and Blessed of Umbria and of Those Whose Bodies Rest in That Province),¹⁹ offers some context.

By the early 15th century, the Abbey of Sassovivo had entered a period of decline. In 1467, Pope Paul II established the commendatory system,²⁰ which further contributed to the abbey's deterioration. Despite the inclusion of Olivetan Benedictine monks, the abbey's holdings were gradually dismantled. By 1814, the abbey was suppressed, and after the 1832 earthquake, the remaining monks ceded

¹⁷ Brodie, N., Doole, J., & Watson, P. (2000). *Stealing history: The illicit trade in cultural material*. The McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research. https://www.obs-traffic.museum/sites/default/files/ressources/files/Brodie_stealing_history_0.pdf; Lucherini, V. (2023). *The Long and Sordid History of Christian Relic Theft*. The Boy Monk. https://theboymonk.com/the-long-and-sordid-history-of-christian-relic-theft/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹⁸ Diocesi di Foligno. (2020, April 16). *Giovedì 16.04.2020: diretta Santa Messa dall'abbazia di S. Croce di Sassovivo* [Thursday, April 16, 2020: live broadcast of the Holy Mass from the Abbey of S. Croce di Sassovivo]. Diocesi di Foligno. <https://www.diocesidifoligno.it/2020/04/16/giovedi-16-04-2020-diretta-santa-messa-dallabbazia-di-s-croce-di-sassovivo/>

¹⁹ Jacobilli, L. (1656). *Vite de' Santi e Beati dell'Umbria e di quelli i corpi de' quali riposano in essa provincia* [Lives of the Saints and Blessed of Umbria and of those whose bodies rest in that province] (Vol. II, pp. 134–138). Foligno: Appresso Agostino Alterij. In 1997, the author obtained a microfilm of Jacobilli's work from the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC 20003, specifically to consult his hagiographical account of St. Maron.

²⁰ The commendatory system refers to the practice where an ecclesiastic or sometimes a layman holds an abbey, drawing its revenues and possibly having some jurisdiction, but does not exercise authority over the inner monastic discipline. Ott, M. (1999–2023). *Commendatory abbot*. Catholic Encyclopedia. <https://www.encyclopedia2000.com/cathopedia/vol4/volfour167.shtml>



their rights to the bishops of Foligno. By 1860, the property had been transferred to the state, the episcopal mensa,²¹ and private ownership.²²



Figure 4: The Reliquary Chef of St. Maron with the stamped mark on the base and back of the neck of the chef featuring a cross with the letters SA, XO, VI, and VO. Cabinet Fligny, Paris, France, December 17, 2015.

²¹ The episcopal mensa refers to the portion of church property allocated to the support of the bishop, distinct from that allocated to the chapter, and managed according to the bishop's discretion. Boudinhon, A. (1999–2023). Mensal Revenue. Catholic Encyclopedia. <https://www.ecatholic2000.com/cathopedia/vol10/volten185.shtml>

²² Diocesi di Foligno (2020).

Jacobilli records that in 1490, Bishop Luca Cibo of Foligno, concerned about the inadequate preservation of Saint Maron's skull, transferred it to the cathedral and commissioned a new reliquary. This bust-shaped reliquary, sculpted by Francesco di Valeriano da Foligno (Roschetto), was donated by Domenico di Martino Borsciani²³ and has since housed the relics in the crypt of the Cathedral of Foligno (Figure 6).



Figure 5: Top view of the Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron, ca. 12th century. Cabinet Fligny, Paris, France, December 17, 2015.

These historical accounts raise several unresolved questions: Was the reliquary chef lost during this period of instability? Was it taken for its monetary value while the skull remained behind? Was the skull enshrined in Volperino without a reliquary, or housed in an older one deemed unsuitable for veneration? Given the history of the

²³ Marzetti (1998) and Iluoghi del silenzio. (2019, January 29). *Castello di Uppello – Foligno (PG). Castelli del Folignate, Folignate, Umbria*. <https://www.iluoghidelsilenzio.it/castello-di-uppello-foligno-pg/>



abbey and Saint Maron's skull's journey, it is conceivable that the abbey's decline contributed to the dispersal of its sacred relics, including the reliquary chef now on sale in France. The abbey's turbulent history likely disrupted not only its physical structure but also its custodianship of sacred objects. Further archival research may provide additional insights into the fate of the reliquary.



Figure 6: Reliquary of St. Maron's relic at the Cathedral of Foligno, Italy, sculpted by Francesco di Valeriano da Foligno (Roschetto), ca. 1490. Source: G. Hourani Collection, 1998.

Hagiography of Saint Maron and Its Relationship with His Relics

It is well known that in the 4th A.D. century, monasticism flourished in St. Anthony's Egypt and in the Palestine of St. Hilarion. It is perhaps less well known that the ascetic way of life also was thriving in Syria, Antioch, and



Mesopotamia at this time. One of the leaders of such ascetic life was a hermit named Maron.

The earliest written information about St. Maron (ca. 350–410)²⁴ can be found in *Historia Religiosa* (c. 440) of Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrrhus²⁵ (393–466), written in Greek.²⁶

Theodoret was a revered writer of his time. His book, *Historia Religiosa*, is a preeminent source for early Syrian monastic and ascetic life. In his book, Theodoret wrote:

“Attending in this way to the divine cultivation and treating souls and bodies alike, he [Maron] himself underwent a short illness, so that we might learn the weakness of nature and the manliness of resolution, and departed from life. A bitter war over his body arose between his neighbors. One of the adjacent villages that was well-populated came out in mass, drove off the others and seized this thrice desired treasure [‘Saint Maron wished to be buried with the hermit Zebinas’]²⁷ building a great shrine, they reap benefit therefrom even to this day, honoring this victor with a public festival. We ourselves reap his blessing even at a distance; for sufficient for us instead of his tomb is his memory.”²⁸

²⁴ Also written as follows: Mauro, Maroun, Mârûn, Marun and Maroon. Some have placed his death as late as 423.

²⁵ Theodoret of Cyrrhus. (1864). *Patrologiae Graecae*, Vol. LXXXII, columns 1417–1419. “The site of Cyrrhus is located in the Afrin valley (North Syria) at the crossing of the roads between Antioch and inner Syria.” Abdul Massih, J., Benech, C., & Gelin, M. (2009). First results on the city planning of Cyrrhus (Syria). *ArchéoSciences / Journal of Archaeometry*. <https://doi.org/10.4000/archeosciences.1584>

²⁶ Hourani, G. (2023, April). *New Syriac version of Theodoret's St. Maron account has been discovered*. Maronite Research Institute. <https://www.maronite-institute.org/2023-Vatican-manuscripts-discovery-St-Marion-life.pdf>. For detailed information on the discovery, consult: Kessel, G. (2022). *Membra disjecta sinaïtica III: Two (palimpsest) fragments of Sin. geo. 49 and their four Syriac undertexts*. *The Vatican Library Review*, 1(2), 257-270. <https://doi.org/10.1163/27728641-00102003>

²⁷ Theodore of Cyrrhus. (1985). *A history of the monks of Syria* (R. M. Price, Trans.; p. 119, note #3). Michigan.

²⁸ Cyrrhus, T. (1985). *A history of the monks of Syria*, pp. 117–119.



After St. Maron's death, his relics were the object of considerable interest and conflict. The people of a neighboring village, believed to be Brad or Barad in the environs of Kfar-Nabo,²⁹ succeeded in taking his body.³⁰

A church was subsequently built in his honor, and a sarcophagus containing the Saint's body was placed within it. It is believed that later, the Saint's disciples transported his skull to Apamea³¹ in Syria, where they established the renowned St. Maron Monastery, or "Beit Maron," around the year 452. According to the Arab historian Al-Masoudi (d. 960):

*"There was dedicated to him (St. Maron) a great convent, located in the east of Hamah and Chizar. It was a splendid building. Around it were three hundred cells, inhabited by monks.... That convent was sacked, and the cells around it, by the many raids of the Arabs and by the cruelty of the Sultan. It is situated on the shore of the Orontes, the river of Emese and Antioch."*³²

The hagiography of St. Maron emphasizes his profound spiritual legacy and the reverence he inspired both during his life and in the centuries that followed, as reflected in the fervent devotion to his sacred relics. After his death, his body became a symbol of sanctity, with his relics enshrined first in a church built by his disciples and later in the renowned Beit Maron Monastery. However, the destruction of this monastery and the turbulent times that ensued—marked by invasions and the displacement of his followers—pose an enduring mystery: what became of St. Maron's relics amidst such upheavals? This question leads us to explore the fate of his sacred remains, culminating in the remarkable tale of their journeys, including the accounts of the reliquary chef tied to his legacy that resurfaced centuries later in Paris.

²⁹ AbouZayd, S. (1993), *Ihidayutha*, p. 364. Also written as Kefr-Nabo, or Kphar-Nabo.

³⁰ Competition to obtain the bodies of holy men is well known in the Orient. For more information, Theodore of Cyrrhus. (1985). *A history of the monks of Syria* (R. M. Price, Trans.). Michigan University Press.

³¹ Apamea Cherronesus, or Qal'at al-Madiq, is located between Hamah and Aleppo in today's Syria. Hedlund, M., & Rowley, H. (Eds. & Trans.). (1959). *Atlas of the early Christian world*. Amsterdam.

³² Al-Masoudi. (1897). *Le Livre de l'Avertissement et de la Révision* [The Book of Admonition and Revision] (C. de Vaux, Trans.). (p. 211). The English translation is that of the author.



The Enigma of Saint Maron's Relics: Tracing Their Sacred Journey from the 5th to the 21st Centuries

Blessed Patriarch Estephan Douaihy,³³ in his book *History of the Maronite Nation* (Tārīkh al-Ṭāʾifah al-Mārūniyah),³⁴ recounts that when the Maronite Patriarch of Antioch, Youhanna (John) Maron (ca. 628–707), fled from the armies of Justinian II in 694, he traveled from Antioch to the Monastery of Hama. With him, he carried the relic of St. Maron's skull, which served as a source of spiritual strength during this time of hardship. Upon settling in Kfar-Hay,³⁵ he constructed a chapel and a monastery named after St. Maron, enshrining the skull—renowned for its healing properties—within the chapel. This became the reason the monastery was called “*Rish Moryo*” or “*Rish Moran*,” meaning “head of our lord Maron,” now known as St. John Maron's Monastery. An annual feast day commemorating the transfer of the relic was established on the fifth of January.³⁶

Very little, if any, records about the relics survived until an unexpected chronicling appeared in 1656 in Jacobilli's *Vite de' Santi e Beati dell'Umbria e di quelli i corpi de' quali riposano in essa provincia*,³⁷ where he asserted that in 1130 A.D., the skull of St. Maron was relocated to the Umbria region in Italy. The Bibliotheca Sanctorum provides intriguing details:

“Regarding the relics of Saint Maron, Jacobilli affirms that the Saint's skull is now preserved in Foligno after being transferred three times. The first transfer occurred in 1130, when Abbot Michele of the Croce di Sassovivo,³⁸ during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, brought back the skull

³³ Patriarch Estephan Douaihy was beatified as “Blessed” on August 2, 2024, at the Maronite Patriarchate's See in Bkerke, Lebanon.

³⁴ Douaihy, S. (1890). *Tārīkh al-Ṭāʾifah al-Mārūniyah* [History of the Maronite Sect] (R. Al-Chartouni, Ed.). Beirut, Lebanon: Al-Maṭbaʿah al-Kāthūlikiyah. (pp. 30–31).

³⁵ Also written Kfarhai, Kefr-Hay, Kefr-Hai, or Kphar-Haī.

³⁶ Douaihy, S. (1890). *Tārīkh al-Ṭāʾifah al-Mārūniyah* [History of the Maronite Sect], p. 31.

³⁷ Jacobilli (1656).

³⁸ Count Abbot Michele of Uppello was a key figure in the history of the Abbey of Sassovivo and the influential Counts of Uppello. In 1066, the Uppello family allowed the hermit Mainardo to establish a hermitage on the land of their castle, which later developed into an abbey. Count Michele, who later became the abbot by virtue of his lordship, is recorded to have embarked on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land around 1096, a journey that enhanced the abbey's prestige. During this pilgrimage, he is believed to have acquired the relic of Saint Maron's skull, which he



of the revered Saint from a Maronite monastery in Syria. Shortly thereafter, and at the request of the same Abbot, the skull was moved from Sassovivo to a church erected in honor of the Saint in the nearby town of Volperino. The third transfer took place in 1490, when the relic was moved from Volperino to the Cathedral of Foligno, where it was placed in a silver statue. The authenticity of the first transfer (from Syria to Sassovivo) is recorded in the Chronicon Monasterii S. Crucis Saxivivi, while the other two transfers are documented in the archives of the Church in Volperino and the Town Hall of Foligno.”³⁹

The silver statue mentioned by Jacobilli is currently housed in the crypt of the Cathedral of Foligno, which contains numerous valuable artifacts.⁴⁰ With the approval of the Vatican’s appropriate authorities, a replica of the statue containing a relic was gifted to the Maronite people by Bishop Arduino Bertoldo of Foligno in response to a request from the Maronite Church. On January 8, 2000, the relic returned with solemn celebration to the Monastery of St. John Maron in Kfar-Hay, 870 years after its journey to Sassovivo, accompanied by a delegation from Foligno led by Bishop Bertoldo.⁴¹

IV. Unraveling a Lost Legacy: Investigative and Forensic Insights into the Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron

Several factors suggest that the 12th-century reliquary head may have originally housed Saint Maron’s skull, aligning with historical records and forensic observations:

brought back to Sassovivo. As veneration of Saint Maron grew, the abbey granted land in Volperino, where a church dedicated to the saint was constructed in 1135 and the skull was enshrined. Iluoghi del silenzio (2019).

³⁹ Bibliotheca Sanctorum. (1967). *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* (pp. 1195 and 1196). Translation is that of the author.

⁴⁰ The author visited and conducted research at the Monastery of Sassovivo, the church in Volperino, and the Cathedral of Foligno in 1998 and again in 2005. She was granted the privilege of viewing the "silver statue" reliquary of St. Maron and photographing it in the crypt of the Cathedral. Additionally, she collected valuable insights from local clergy and parishioners, further enriching her study of the relics' historical and religious significance.

⁴¹ Sensi, M. (2014). Monsignor Arduino Bertoldo, vescovo di Foligno. *Bollettino Storico della Città di Foligno*, XXXV-XXXVI, 2012-2013. https://www.academia.edu/34525123/Monsignor_Arduino_Bertoldo_vescovo_di_Foligno; Zoghbi, M.-R. (2000, February 9). *La relique de Saint-Maroun ramenée à Kfarhay* [The Relic of Saint Maron Returned to Kfar-Hay]. *La Revue du Liban*. <http://www.rdl.com.lb/2000/3723/maroun.html>



- **Timeframe Alignment:** The chef's dating coincides with the transfer of Saint Maron's relic to Sassovivo in 1130.
- **Provenance and Ownership Marks:** Insignia on the chef identify it with the Abbey of Sassovivo, where the skull was first enshrined.
- **Structural Suitability:** The three-part design, featuring a removable top, suggests it was specifically crafted to house a sacred relic such as a skull.
- **Abbey's Decline and Relic Dispersal:** The Abbey of Sassovivo's decline, particularly from the 15th century onward, led to the loss and dispersal of its sacred objects. This historical backdrop may explain how the reliquary chef was ultimately separated from the skull and resurfaced under uncertain circumstances.
- **Relic Transfers and Separation:** By 1490, when the skull was relocated to the Cathedral of Foligno, the original reliquary may have been lost or damaged, prompting Bishop Luca Cibo to commission a new silver statue.

A forensic comparison between the seller's description and Jacobilli's historical account further reinforces these connections:

- **Chronological Consistency:** The reliquary's 12th-century dating corresponds to the period when Saint Maron's skull arrived in Umbria.
- **Ownership Confirmation:** Markings indicate that the reliquary belonged to the Abbey of Sassovivo, consistent with Jacobilli's documentation.
- **Functional Design:** The removable top aligns with relic enshrinement practices, suggesting it once housed the skull.
- **Evidence of Separation:** Bishop Cibo's concerns in 1490 suggest the skull lacked a reliquary at that time, supporting the hypothesis that the reliquary chef and the relic were separated.
- **Current Discrepancies:** Modern reinforcements and repairs complicate a definitive forensic match, but historical evidence suggests the chef may have once enshrined a skull.

While the connection between the reliquary chef and Saint Maron's skull remains plausible, further research is needed. A thorough comparison of relic inventories



from the Abbey of Sassovivo⁴² and the Cathedral of Foligno⁴³ could provide crucial evidence to substantiate this hypothesis.

V. Conclusion

This investigation into the Reliquary Chef of Saint Maron, supported by both historical and forensic analysis, provides a plausible connection to the relic's original role in housing the saint's skull. The alignment of the reliquary's design, provenance, and chronological context with historical records suggests it could have served as the original container for Saint Maron's skull in the 12th century. However, while the theory remains credible, further research is essential to confirm this connection.

A detailed examination of relic inventories from the Abbey of Sassovivo and the Cathedral of Foligno, as well as continued forensic investigation, could offer crucial evidence to either substantiate or challenge the hypothesis. Such research would deepen our understanding of relic enshrinement practices in medieval Umbria, the custodianship and dispersal of sacred objects during times of upheaval, and the broader narrative of Saint Maron's veneration.

Ultimately, the investigation highlights the need for further archival and forensic exploration to clarify the true origins of the Reliquary Chef and Saint Maron's relics, offering an opportunity to refine the historical narrative and expand scholarly discourse on the preservation and authentication of sacred objects.

⁴² The extensive archives of the Abbey of Sassovivo, consisting of 7,500 well-preserved parchments and documents dating back to the early 11th century, are currently housed at the Diocesan Archives of Spoleto, in Spoleto, Perugia, Italy.

⁴³ The Historical Archive of the Diocese of Foligno is located on the second floor of Palazzo Elmi-Andreozzi, at Piazza San Giacomo, 1, 06034 – Foligno (PG). In addition to the archive of the Bishop's Curia, it holds the Archive of the Chapter of the Cathedral of San Feliciano, the historical archives of various parishes, confraternities, and movements, as well as a section dedicated to the Contemporary Catholic Movement of Foligno. The archive also includes private collections that it has acquired over time.